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Front Edit Other
Page Page Page

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INTELLIGENCE REPORTS FEED THE PRE-CAMPAIGN FIRES.

America's people expect you to be on a par with God and Joe. They expect you to be able to tell them when the war will start next Tuesday at 32 p. m.—Gen. Walter Bedell Smith.

THAT comment was made when Nikita Khrushchev was just one of the fellows hanging around Stalin's outer office. At the time, Smith was about to become director of the Central Intelligence agency.

Of course Smith deliberately exaggerated the demands on U. S. intelligence sources. But there was also an element of truth in his remark. What could happen isn't a good enough answer for many people. They want to know what will happen.

But that's not how the evaluation of foreign intelligence works. It deals largely in known capabilities and possible or probable intentions. Some guesswork is inevitable if intelligence is to be used as a guide for policy.

THE subject was involved in controversy when the new secretary of defense, Thomas S. Gates, jr., told Congress of a revised estimate on Soviet missile strength. No longer are the Russians conceded a 3-to-1 edge. Instead, Gates said, the "missile gap" has been sharply narrowed.

Then the roars went up from critics of the Eisenhower defense program. They assailed Gates for basing a judgment on "what the Soviet Union will probably do" instead of on how many missiles it is capable of making. Later President Eisenhower drew on his knowledge of Army intelligence to point out that both intention and capability figure in any estimate of the enemy.

Allen Dulles, director of the Central Intelligence agency, has denied any change in the method of estimating Russian strength. He said that more hard facts are now available. But Democratic senators claim that Dulles did an about-face last Friday. He was said to have cited even later information that pictures Russia with a frightening lead in missile power.

The "X" factor in the dispute is politics. Republicans see an advantage in a rosier view of our position. Democrats can be expected to attack.

The argument has not contributed to the enlightenment. We are left with the feeling that Khrushchev is laughing